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THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER

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## THE MYSTERY OF THE PEARL NECKLACE

THE Old Man in the Corner had a very curious theory about that mysterious affair of the pearl necklace, and though it all occurred a few years ago, I am tempted to put his deductions down on record, because, as far as I know, neither the police of this or any other country, nor the public have ever found a satisfactory solution for what was undoubtedly a strange and mystifying adventure.

I remembered the case quite well when first he spoke to me about it one afternoon in what had become my favourite tea-haunt in Fleet Street; the only thing I was not quite certain of was the identity of the august personage to whom the pearl necklace was to be presented. I did know, of course, that she belonged to one of the reigning families of Europe and that she had been an active, and somewhat hot-headed and bitter opponent of the Communist movement in her own country, in consequence of which both she and her exalted husband had been the object of more than one murderous attack by the other side.

It was on the occasion of the august lady's almost miraculous escape from a peculiarly well-planned and brutal assault that a number of ladies in England subscribed the sum of fifteen thousand pounds for

the purchase of an exquisite pearl necklace to be presented to her as a congratulatory gift.

Rightly or wrongly, the donors of this princely gift feared that a certain well-known political organisation on the Continent would strive by every means in its power, fair or foul, to prevent this token of English goodwill from reaching the recipient; and also, as it chanced to happen, there had been during the past few months a large number of thefts of valuables on Continental railways. So it became a question who should be entrusted by the committee of subscribers with the perilous risk of taking the necklace over for presentation.

Finally their choice fell upon a certain Captain Arthur Saunders, nephew of Sir Montague Bowden, who was chairman of the ladies' committee. Captain Saunders had, it seems, travelled abroad a great deal, and his wife was foreign—Swedish, so it was understood; it was thought that if he went abroad now, in the company of his wife, the object of their journey might be thought to be a visit to Mrs. Saunders' relations, and the conveying of the pearl necklace to its destination might thus remain more or less a secret.

The choice was approved of by all the committee, and it was decided that Captain and Mrs. Saunders should start by the ten a.m. train for Paris on the sixteenth of March. Captain Saunders was to call the previous afternoon at a certain bank in Charing Cross, where the necklace was deposited, and there receive it as an almost sacred trust from the hands



of the manager. Further, it was arranged that Mrs. Saunders should, immediately on arrival in Paris, send a wire to Mrs. Berners, a great friend of hers who was the secretary of the committee, and, in fact, that she should keep the committee informed of Captain Saunders' well-being at all the more important points of their journey.

And thus they started.

But no news came from Paris on the sixteenth. At first no anxiety was felt on that score, everyone being ready to surmise that the Calais-Paris train had been late in, and that the Saunders had perhaps only barely time to clear their luggage at the Customs and catch the train de luxe which would take them on, via Cologne, without a chance of sending the promised telegram. But soon after midday of the seventeenth, Sir Montague Bowden had a wire from Mrs. Saunders from Paris saying: "Arthur disappeared since last night. Desperately anxious. Please come at once. Have booked room for you here. Mary, Hotel Majestic."

The news was terrifying; however, Sir Montague Bowden, with commendable zeal, at once wired to Mary announcing his immediate departure for Paris, and as it was then too late for him to catch the afternoon Continental train, he started by the evening one, travelling all night and arriving at the Hotel Majestic in the early morning.

As soon as he had had a bath and some breakfast, he went in search of information. He found that the French police already had the "affaire" in

hand, but that they had not so far the slightest clue to the mysterious disappearance of le Capitaine Saunders. He found the management of the Majestic in a state of offended dignity, and Mrs. Saunders in one that verged on hysteria; but fortunately, he also found at the hotel a Mr. Haasberg, brother of Mrs. Saunders, a Swedish business man of remarkable coolness and clearness of judgment, who promptly put him "au fait" with what had occurred.

It seems that Mr. Haasberg was settled in business in Paris, and that he had hoped to catch a glimpse of his sister and brother-in-law in the evening of the sixteenth at the Gare du Nord on their way through to the East; but on that very morning he had received a telegram from Mary asking him to book a couple of rooms—a bed-room and a sitting-room—for one night for them at the Hotel Majestic. This Mr. Haasberg did, glad enough that he would see something more of his sister than he had been led to hope.

On the afternoon of the sixteenth he was kept late at business, and was unable to meet the Saunders' at the station, but towards nine o'clock he walked round to the Majestic, hoping to find them in. Their room was on the third floor. Mr. Haasberg went up in the lift, and as soon as he reached No. 301 he became aware of a buzz of conversation coming from within, which, however, ceased as soon as he had pushed open the door.

On entering the room he saw that Captain Saunders had a visitor, a tall, thick-set man, who wore an old-

fashioned, heavy moustache and large, gold-rimmed spectacles. At sight of Mr. Haasberg the man clapped his hat—a bowler—on his head, pulled his coat-collar over his ears, and with a hasty: “Well, s’long, old man! I’ll wait till to-morrow!” spoken with a strong foreign accent, he walked rapidly out of the room and down the corridor.

Haasberg stood for a moment in the doorway to watch the disappearing personage, but he did this without any ulterior motive or thought of suspicion; then he turned back into the room and greeted his brother-in-law.

Saunders seemed to Haasberg to be nervous and ill at ease; in response to the latter’s inquiry after Mary, he explained that she had remained in her room as he had a man to see on business. Haasberg made some casual remark about this visitor, and then Mary Saunders came in. She, too, appeared troubled and agitated, and as soon as she had greeted her brother, she turned to her husband and asked very eagerly:

“Well, has he gone?”

Saunders, giving a significant glance in Haasberg’s direction, replied with an obvious effort at indifference:

“Yes, yes; he’s gone. But he said he would be back to-morrow.”

At which Mary seemed to give a sigh of relief.

Scenting some uncomfortable mystery, Haasberg questioned her, and also Saunders, about their visitor, but could not elicit any satisfactory explanation.



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"Oh, there is nothing mysterious about old Pasquier!" was all that either of them would say.

"He is an old pal of Arthur's," Mary added lightly, "but he is such an awful bore that I got Arthur to say that I was out, so that he might get rid of him more quickly."

Somehow Haasberg felt that these explanations were very lame. He could not get it out of his head that there was something mysterious about the visitor, and knowing the purpose of the Saunders' journey, he thought it as well to give them a very serious word of warning about Continental hotels generally, and to suggest that they should, after this stay in Paris, go straight through in the train de luxe and never halt again until the fifteen thousand pounds necklace was safely in the hands of the august lady for whom it was intended. But both Arthur and Mary laughed at these words of warning.

"My dear fellow," Arthur said, seemingly rather in a huff, "we are not such mugs as you think us. Mary and I have travelled on the Continent at least as much as you have, and are fully alive to the dangers attendant upon our mission. As a matter of fact, the moment we arrived, I gave the necklace in its own padlocked tin box, just as I brought it over from England, in charge of the hotel management, who immediately locked it up in their strong-room, so even if good old Pasquier had designs on it—which I can assure you he has not—he would stand no chance of getting hold of it. And now, sit down, there's a good chap, and talk of something else."



Only half reassured, Haasberg sat down and had a chat. But he did not stay long. Mary was obviously tired, and soon said good-night. Arthur offered to accompany his brother-in-law to the latter's lodgings in the Rue de Moncigny.

"I would like a walk," he said, "before going to bed."

So the two men walked out together, and Haasberg finally said good-night to Arthur just outside his own lodgings. It was then close upon ten o'clock. The little party had agreed to spend the next day together, as the train de luxe did not go until the evening, and Haasberg had promised to take a holiday from business. Before going to bed he attended to some urgent correspondence, and had just finished a letter when his telephone bell rang. To his horror he heard his sister's voice speaking.

"Don't keep Arthur up so late, Herman," she said. "I am dog tired, and can't go to sleep until he returns."

"Arthur!" he replied. "But Arthur left me at my door two hours ago!"

"He has not returned," she insisted, "and I am getting anxious."

"Of course you are; but he can't be long now. He must have turned into a café and forgot the time. Do ring me up as soon as he comes in."

Unable to rest, however, and once more vaguely anxious, Haasberg went hastily back to the Majestic. He found Mary nearly distracted with anxiety, and

as he himself felt anything but reassured, he did not know how to comfort her.

At one time he went down into the hall to ascertain whether anything was known in the hotel about Saunders' movements earlier in the evening; but at this hour of the night there was only the night porter and the watchman about, and they knew nothing of what had occurred before they came on duty.

There was nothing for it but to await the morning as calmly as possible. This was difficult enough, as Mary Saunders was evidently in a terrible state of agitation. She was quite certain that something tragic had happened to her husband, but Haasberg tried in vain to get her to speak of the mysterious visitor who had from the first aroused his own suspicions. Mary persisted in asserting that the visitor was just an old pal of Arthur's and that no suspicion of any kind could possibly rest upon him.

In the early morning, Haasberg went off to the nearest commissariat of police. They took the matter in hand without delay, and within the hour had obtained some valuable information from the personnel of the hotel. To begin with, it was established that at about ten minutes past ten the previous evening, that is to say a quarter of an hour or so after Haasberg had parted from Arthur Saunders outside his own lodgings, the latter had returned to the Majestic, and at once asked for the tin box which he had deposited in the bureau. There was some difficulty in acceding to his request, because the clerk who was in charge of the keys of the strong-room

could not be found. However, M. le Capitaine was so insistent that search was made for the clerk, who presently appeared with the keys, and after the usual formalities, handed over the tin box to Saunders, who signed a receipt for it in the book. Haasberg had since then identified the signature, which was quite clear and incontestable.

Saunders then went upstairs, refusing to take the lift; and five minutes later he came down again, nodded to the hall-porter, and went out of the hotel. No one had seen him since, but during the course of the morning, the valet on the fourth floor had found an empty tin box in the gentlemen's cloak-room. This box was produced, and to her unutterable horror, Mary Saunders recognised it as the one which had held the pearl necklace.

This evidence, as it gradually came to light, was a staggering blow both to Mary and to Haasberg himself, because until this moment neither of them had thought that the necklace was in jeopardy; they both believed that it was safely locked up in the strong-room of the hotel.

Haasberg now feared the worst. He blamed himself terribly for not having made more certain of the mysterious visitor's identity. He had not yet come to the point of accusing his brother-in-law in his mind of a conspiracy to steal the necklace, but frankly, at this stage, he did not know what to think. Saunders' conduct had—to say the least—been throughout extremely puzzling. Why had he elected to spend the night in Paris, when all arrangements had been made



for him and his wife to travel straight through? Who was the mysterious visitor with the walrus moustache, vaguely referred to by both Arthur and Mary as "old Pasquier"? and, above all, why had Arthur withdrawn the necklace from the hotel strong-room where it was quite safe, and, with it in his pocket, walked about the streets of Paris at that hour of the night?

Haasberg was quite convinced that "old Pasquier" knew something about the whole affair; but strangely enough, Mary persisted in asserting that he was quite harmless and an old friend of Arthur's who was beyond suspicion; when further pressed with questions, she declared that she had no idea where the man lodged, and that, in fact, she believed that he had left Paris the self-same evening en route for Brussels, where he was settled in business.

Further enquiry amongst the personnel of the hotel revealed the fact that Captain Saunders' visitor had been seen by the hall porter when he came soon after half-past eight, and asked whether le Capitaine Saunders had finished dinner; his question being answered in the affirmative, he went upstairs, refusing to take the lift. Half an hour or so later he was seen by one of the waiters in the lounge hurriedly crossing the hall, and finally by the two boys in attendance at the swing doors when he went out of the hotel. All agreed that the man was very tall, and thick-set, that he wore a heavy moustache and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. He had on a bowler hat and an overcoat with the collar pulled right up to his ears. The hall porter, who himself spoke English fairly

well, was under the impression that the man was not English, although he made his enquiries in that language.

In addition to all these investigations, the commissaire de police, on his second visit to the hotel, was able to assure Haasberg that all the commissariats in and around Paris had been communicated with by telephone so as to ascertain whether any man answering to Saunders' description had been injured during the night in a street accident, and taken in somewhere for shelter; also that a description of the necklace had already been sent round to all the *monts-de-piété* throughout the country. The police were also sharply on the look-out for the man with the walrus moustache, but so far without success.

Mary Saunders obstinately persisted in her denial of any knowledge about him. "Arthur," she said, "sometimes saw 'old Pasquier' in London, but she did not know anything about him, neither what his nationality was, nor where he lodged. She did not know when he had left London, nor where he could be found in Paris. All that she knew," so she said, "was that his name was Pasquier, and that he was in business in Brussels; she therefore concluded that he was Belgian.

Even to her own brother she would not say more, although he succeeded in making her understand how strange her attitude must appear both to the police and to her friends, and what harm she was doing to her husband, but at this she burst into floods of tears and swore that she knew nothing about Pas-

quier's whereabouts, and that she believed him to be innocent of any attempt to steal the necklace or to injure Arthur.

There was nothing more to be said for the present, and Haasberg sent the telegram to Sir Montague Bowden because he felt that someone less busy than himself should look after the affair, and be a comfort to Mary, whose mental condition appeared pitiable in the extreme.

It was actually while the two men were talking the whole case over that Haasberg received the intimation from the police that they believed the missing man had been found; at any rate, would monsieur give himself the trouble to come round to the commissariat at once. This, of course, Haasberg did, accompanied by Sir Montague, and at the commissariat, to their horror, they found the unfortunate Saunders in a terrible condition.

Briefly the commissaire explained to them that about a quarter past ten last night an agent de police making his rounds saw a man crouching in the angle of a narrow blind alley that leads out of the Rue de Moncigny. On being shaken up by the agent, the man struggled to his feet, but he appeared quite dazed and unable to reply to any questions that were put to him. He was then conveyed to the nearest commissariat, where he spent the night.

He was obviously suffering from loss of memory, and could give no account of himself, nor were any papers of identification found upon him, not even a visiting card; but close beside him, on the pavement



where he was crouching, the agent had picked up a handkerchief which was saturated with chloroform. The handkerchief bore the initials A. S. The man, of course, was Arthur Saunders. What had happened to him it was impossible to ascertain. He certainly did not appear to be physically hurt, although from time to time, when Mr. Haasberg or Sir Montague tried to question him, he passed his hand across the back of his head, and an expression of pathetic puzzlement came into his eyes.

His two friends, after the usual formalities of identification, were allowed to take him back to the Hotel Majestic, where he was restored to the arms of his anxious wife. The English doctor, hastily summoned, could not find any trace of injury about the body, only the head appeared rather tender when touched. The doctor's theory was that Saunders had probably been sandbagged first, and then rendered more completely insensible by means of the chloroformed handkerchief, and that excitement, anxiety, and the blow on the head had caused temporary loss of memory, which quietude and good nursing would soon put right.

In the meanwhile, of the fifteen thousand pounds necklace there was not the slightest trace.

Unfortunately, the disappearance of so valuable a piece of jewellery was one of those cases that could not be kept from public knowledge, and the consternation—not to say the indignation—amongst the good ladies who had subscribed the money for the gift to the august lady was unbounded.

Everybody was blaming everybody else; the choice of Captain Saunders as the accredited messenger was now severely criticised; pointed questions were asked as to his antecedents, as to his wife's foreign relations, and it was soon found that very little was known about either.

Of course, everybody knew that he was Sir Montague Bowden's nephew, and that, thanks to his uncle's influence, he had obtained a remunerative and rather important post in the office of one of the big insurance companies. But what his career had been before that no one knew. Rather tardily the committee was taken severely to task for having entrusted so important a mission to a man who was either a coward or a thief, or both; for at first no one doubted that Saunders had met a confederate in Paris and had handed over the necklace to him, whilst he himself enacted a farce of being waylaid, chloroformed and robbed, and subsequently of losing his memory.

In the meanwhile the police in England had, of course, been communicated with by their French confrères, but before they could move in the matter, or enjoin discretion on all concerned, an enterprising young man on the staff of the *Express Post* had interviewed Miss Elizabeth Spicer, who was the parlour-maid at the Saunders' flat in Sloane Street.

That young lady, it seems, had something to say about a gentleman named Pasquier, who was not an infrequent visitor at the flat. She described him as a fine, tall gentleman, who wore large gold-rimmed

spectacles, and a full military moustache. It seems that the last time Miss Elizabeth saw him was two days before her master and mistress' departure for abroad. Mr. Pasquier called late that evening and stayed till past ten o'clock. When Elizabeth was rung for in order to show him out, he was saying good-bye to the captain in the hall, and she heard him say, "in his funny foreign way," as she put it:

"Well, I shall be in Paris as soon as you. Tink it over, my friend."

And on the top of that came a story told by Henry Tidy, Sir Montague Bowden's butler. According to him, Captain Saunders called at Sir Montague Bowden's house in Lowndes Street in the afternoon of the fifteenth. The two gentlemen remained closeted together in the library for nearly an hour, when Tidy was summoned to show the visitor out. Sir Montague, it seems, went to the front door with his nephew, and as the latter finally wished him good-bye, Sir Montague said to him:

"My dear boy, you can take it from me that there's nothing to worry about, and, in any case, I am afraid that it is too late to make any fresh arrangements."

"It's because of Mary," the captain rejoined. "She has made herself quite ill over it."

"The journey will do her good," Sir Montague went on pleasantly. "But if I were you I would have a good talk with your brother-in-law. He must know his Paris well. Take my advice and spend the night at the Majestic. You can always get rooms there."

This conversation Tidy heard quite distinctly, and



he related the whole incident both to the journalist and to the police. After that the amateur investigators of crime were divided into two camps; there were those who persisted in thinking that Pasquier and Saunders, and probably Mrs. Saunders also, had conspired together to steal the necklace, and that Saunders had acted the farce of being waylaid and robbed, and losing his memory; they based their deduction on Elizabeth Spicer's evidence and on Mary Saunders's extraordinary persistence in trying to shield the mysterious Pasquier.

Other people, getting hold of Henry Tidy's story, deduced from it that it was indeed Sir Montague Bowden who had planned the whole thing in conjunction with Haasberg, since it was he who had persuaded Saunders to spend the night in Paris, thus giving his accomplice the opportunity of assaulting Saunders and stealing the necklace. To these wise-aces "old Pasquier" was indeed a harmless old pal of Arthur's, whose presence that evening at the Majestic was either a fable invented by Haasberg, or one quite innocent in purpose. In vain did Sir Montague try to explain away Tidy's evidence. Arthur, he said, had certainly called upon him that last afternoon, but what he seemed worried about was his wife's health; he feared that she would not be strong enough to undertake the long journey without a break, so Sir Montague advised him to spend the night in Paris, and, in any case, to talk the matter over with Mary's brother.

The conversation overheard by Tidy could cer-

tainly admit of this explanation, but it did not satisfy the many amateur detectives who preferred to see a criminal in the chairman of the committee, rather than a harmless old gentleman, as eager as themselves to find a solution to the mystery. And while people argued and wrangled there was no news of the necklace, and none of the man with the walrus moustache. His disappearance certainly bore out the theory of his being the guilty party with the connivance of Saunders, as against the Bowden-Haasberg theory.

Captain Saunders was said to be slowly recovering from his loss of memory and subsequent breakdown. Every one at home was waiting to hear what explanation he would give of his amazing conduct in taking the necklace out of the hotel strong-room late that night and sallying forth with it into the streets of Paris at that hour. The explanation came after about a fortnight of suspense in a letter from Mary to her friend Mrs. Berners.

Arthur, she said, had told her that on the fateful evening, after he parted from Mr. Haasberg in the Rue de Moncigny, he had felt restless and anxious about what the latter had told him on the subject of foreign hotels, and he was suddenly seized with the idea that the necklace was not safe in the care of the management of the Majestic, because there would come a moment when he would have to claim the tin box, and this would probably be handed over to him when the hall of the hotel was crowded, and the eyes of expert thieves would then follow his every movement. Therefore he went back to the hotel,



claimed the tin box, and as the latter was large and cumbersome he got rid of it in one of the cloak-rooms of the hotel, slipped the necklace, in its velvet case, in the pocket of his overcoat, and went out with the intention of asking Haasberg to take care of it for him, and only to hand it back to him when on the following evening the train de luxe was on the point of starting. He had been in sight of Haasberg's lodgings when, without the slightest warning, a dull blow on the back of his head, coming he knew not whence, robbed him of consciousness.

This explanation, however, was voted almost unanimously to be very lame, and it was, on the whole, as well that the Saunders had decided to remain abroad for a time. The ladies especially—and above all those who had put their money together for the necklace—were very bitter against him. On the other hand Sir Montague Bowden was having a very rough time of it; he had already had one or two very unpleasant word-tussles with some outspoken friends of his, and there was talk of a slander action that would certainly be a cause célèbre when it came on.

Thus the arguments went on in endless succession until one day—well do I remember the excitement that spread throughout the town as soon as the incident became known—there was a terrible row in one of the big clubs in Piccadilly. Sir Montague Bowden was insulted by one of his fellow members; he was called a thief, and asked what share he was getting out of the sale of the necklace. It was a terrible



position for Sir Montague, for he realised that he had practically no friends who would stand by him in the dispute. Some of the members tried to stop the row, and others appeared indifferent, but no one sided with him.

It was in the very midst of this most unedifying scene—one perhaps unparalleled in the annals of London club-life—that a servant entered the room, and handed a telegram to Sir Montague Bowden.

It had been sent to Sir Montague's private house in Lowndes Street, his secretary had opened it and sent it on to the club.

The telegram had come all the way from the other end of Europe, and had been sent by the august lady in whose hands the priceless necklace, about which there was so much bother in England and France, had just been safely placed. It ran thus:

“Deeply touched by exquisite present just received through kind offices of Captain Saunders from English ladies. Kind thoughts and beautiful necklace equally precious. Kindly convey my grateful thanks to all subscribers.”

Having read out the telegram, Sir Montague Bowden demanded an apology from those who had impugned his honour, and I understand that he got an unqualified one. After that tongues were let loose; the wildest conjectures flew about as to the probable solution of what appeared a more curious mystery

than ever. By evening the papers had got hold of the incident, and all those who were interested in the affair shook their heads and looked portentously wise.

But the hero of the hour was certainly Captain Saunders. From having been voted either a knave or a fool, or both, he was declared all at once to be possessed of all the qualities which had made England great—prudence, astuteness, and tenacity. Captain and Mrs. Saunders arrived in England a few days later; everyone was agog with curiosity, and the poor things had hardly stepped out of the train before they were besieged by newspaper men, and pressed with questions.

The next morning the *Express Post* and the *Daily Thunderer* came out with exclusive interviews with Captain Saunders, who had made no secret of the extraordinary adventure which had once more placed him in possession of the necklace. It seems that he and his wife, on coming out of the Madeleine Church on Easter Sunday, were hustled at the top of the steps by a man whose face they did not see, and who pushed past them very hastily and roughly. Arthur Saunders at once thought of his pockets, and looked to see if his notecase had not disappeared. To his boundless astonishment his hand came in contact with a long, hard parcel in the outside pocket of his overcoat, and this parcel proved to be the velvet case containing the missing necklace.

Both he and his wife were flabbergasted at this discovery, and scarcely believing in this amazing piece of good luck, they managed, with the help of Mr.

Haasberg, despite its being Easter Sunday, to obtain an interview with one of the great jewellers in the Rue de la Paix, who, well knowing the history of the missing necklace, was able to assure them that they had indeed been lucky enough to regain possession of their treasure. That same evening they left by the train de luxe, having been fortunate enough to secure seats; needless to say that the necklace was safely stowed away inside Captain Saunders' breast-pocket.

All was indeed well that ended so well. But the history of the disappearance and reappearance of the pearl necklace has remained a baffling mystery to this day. Neither the Saunders nor Mr. Haasberg ever departed one iota from the circumstantial story which they had originally told, and no one ever heard another word about the man with the walrus moustache and the gold-rimmed spectacles; the French police are still after him in connection with the assault on le Capitaine Saunders, but no trace of him was ever found.

To some people this was a conclusive proof of guilt, but then, having stolen the necklace, why should he have restored it? There never could be any difficulty for an expert thief to dispose of the pearls to Continental dealers. The same argument would, of course, apply to Mr. Haasberg, whom some wiseacres still persisted in accusing. And there always remained the unanswered question: why did Saunders take the pearls out of the strong-room, and where was he taking them to, when he was assaulted and robbed?



Did the man with the walrus moustache really call at the Majestic that night? And if he was innocent, why did he disappear? Why, why, why?

The case had very much interested me at the time, but the mystery was a nine days' wonder as far as I was concerned, and soon far more important matters than the temporary disappearance of a few rows of pearls occupied public attention.

It was really only last year, when I renewed my acquaintance with the Old Man in the Corner, that I bethought myself once more of the mystery of the pearl necklace, and I felt the desire to hear what the spook-like creature's theory was upon the subject.

"The pearl necklace," he said, with a cackle. "Ah, yes! It caused a good bit of stir in its day. But people talked such a lot of irresponsible nonsense that thinking minds had not a chance of arriving at a sensible conclusion."

"No," I rejoined amiably. "But you did."

"Yes, you are right there!" he replied. "I knew well enough where the puzzle lay, but it was not my business to put the police on the right track. And if I had, I should have been the cause of making two innocent and clever people suffer more severely than the guilty party."

"Will you condescend to explain?" I asked, with an indulgent smile.

"Why should I not?" he retorted. And once again his thin fingers started to work on the inevitable piece of string. "It all lies in a nutshell, and is easily understandable if we realise that 'old Pasquier,' the man

with the walrus moustache, was not the friend of the Saunders, but their enemy."

I frowned.

"Their enemy!"

"An old pal, shall we say?" he retorted, "who knew something in the past history of one or the other of them that they did not wish their newest friends to know; really a blackmailer who, under the guise of comradeship, sat not infrequently at their fireside watching an opportunity for extorting a heavy price for his silence and his good-will. Thus he could worm himself into their confidence; he knew their private life; he heard about the necklace, and decided that here was the long-sought-for opportunity at last.

"Think it all over and you will see how well the pieces of that jig-saw puzzle fit together and make a perfect picture. Pasquier calls on the Saunders a day or two before their departure and springs his infamous proposal upon them then. For the time being, Arthur succeeds in giving him the slip: 'his journey is not yet . . . the necklace is not yet in his possession . . .' but he knows the true quality of the blackmailer now, and he is on the alert.

"He begins by going to Sir Montague Bowden and begging him to entrust the mission to somebody else. Judging by the butler's evidence, he even makes a clean breast of his troubles to Sir Montague, who, however, makes light of them and advises consultation with Mr. Haasberg, who, perhaps, would undertake the journey. In any case, it is too late to make fresh arrangements at this hour. Very reluctantly

now, and hoping for the best, the Saunders make a start. But the blackmailer, too, is on the alert; he has succeeded in spying upon them, and in tracing them to the Majestic in Paris. The situation now has become terribly serious, for the blackmailer has thrown off the mask and demands the necklace under threats which apparently the Saunders did not dare defy.

“But they are both clever and resourceful, and as soon as Haasberg’s arrival rids them temporarily of their tormentor, they put their heads together and invent a plot which was destined to free them for ever from the threats of Pasquier, and at the same time would enable them to honour the trust which had been placed in them by the committee. In any case, they had until the morrow to make up their minds. Remember the words which Mr. Haasberg overheard on the part of Pasquier: ‘S’long, old man. I’ll wait till to-morrow!’ Anyway, Pasquier must have gone off that evening confident that he had Captain Saunders entirely in his power, and that the wretched man would on the morrow hand over the necklace without demur.

“But what happened? Arthur having parted from his brother-in-law, went back to the hotel, took the necklace out of the strong-room, and then left it in Mary’s charge. He threw the tin box away, where it would surely be found again. Then he went as far as the Rue de Moncigny and crouched, seemingly unconscious, in the blind alley, having previously



taken the precaution of saturating his handkerchief with chloroform.

"Thus the two clever conspirators cut the ground from under the blackmailer's feet, for the latter now had the police after him for an assault which he might find very difficult to disprove, even if he cleared himself of the charge of having stolen the necklace. Anyway, he would remain a discredited man, and his threats would in the future be defied, because if he dared come out in the open after that, public feeling would be so bitter against him for a crime which he had not committed, that he would never be listened to if he tried to do Captain Saunders an injury. And it was with a view of keeping public indignation at boiling pitch against the supposed thief that the Saunders kept up the comedy for so long. To my mind, that was a very clever move. Then they came out with the story of the restoration of the necklace and became the heroes of the hour.

"Think it over," the funny creature went on, as he finally stuffed his bit of string back into his pocket and rose from the table. "Think it over, and you will realise at once that everything happened just as I have related, and that it is the only theory that fits in with the facts that are known; you'll also agree with me, I think, that Captain and Mrs. Saunders chose the one way of ridding themselves effectually of a dangerous blackmailer.

"But it was a curious case."

## THE MYSTERY OF THE TRAGEDY IN BISHOP'S ROAD

THE Old Man in the Corner was in a philosophising mood that afternoon, and all the while that his thin, clawlike fingers fidgeted with the inevitable piece of string, he gave vent to various disjointed, always sententious, remarks.

Suddenly he said:

"We know, of course, that the world has gone dancing mad! But I doubt if the fashionable craze has ever been responsible before for so dark a tragedy as the death of old Sarah Levison. What do you think?"

"I suppose it is all quite clear to you?" I countered, with what I meant to be withering sarcasm.

"As clear as the proverbial daylight," he replied, undaunted.

"You know how old Mrs. Levison came by her death?"

"Of course I do. I will tell you, if you like."

"By all means. But I am not prepared to be convinced," I added cautiously.

"Well, then, do you remember all the personages in the drama?" he began.

"I think so."

"There were, of course, young Aaron Levison and his wife Rebecca; the latter young, pretty, fond of

pleasure, and above all of dancing; and he, a few years older, but still in the prime of life, more of an athlete than a business man, and yet tied to the shop in which he carried on the trade of pawnbroking for his mother. The latter, an old Jewess, shrewd and dictatorial, was the owner of the business; her son was not even her partner, only a well-paid clerk in her employ, and this fact we must suppose rankled in the mind of her smart daughter-in-law. At any rate, we know that there was no love lost between the two ladies; but the young couple and old Mrs. Levison and another unmarried son lived together in the substantial house over the shop in Bishop's Road. They had three servants, and we are told that they lived well, old Mrs. Levison bearing the bulk of the cost of housekeeping.

"The younger son, Reuben, seems to have been something of a bad egg; he held at one time a clerkship in a bank, but was dismissed for insobriety and laziness; then after the war he was supposed to have bad health consequent on exposure in the trenches, and had not done a day's work since he was demobilised. But in spite, or perhaps because of this, he was very markedly his mother's favourite.

"What money Reuben extracted out of his mother he would spend on amusements, and his sister-in-law was always ready to accompany him. It was either the cinema or dancing—oh, dancing above all! Rebecca Levison was, it seems, a beautiful dancer, and night after night she and Reuben would go to one or other of the halls or hotels where dancing was



going on, and often they would not return until the small hours of the morning.

“Aaron Levison was indulgent and easy-going enough where his young wife was concerned; he thought that she could come to no harm while Reuben was there to look after her. But old Mrs. Levison, with the mistrust of her race for everything that is frivolous and thriftless, thought otherwise. She was convinced in her own mind that her beloved Reuben was being led astray from the path of virtue by his brother's wife, and she appears to have taken every opportunity to impress her thoughts and her fears upon the indulgent husband.

“It seems that one of the chief bones of contention between the old and the young Mrs. Levison was the question of jewellery. Old Mrs. Levison kept charge herself of all the articles of value that were pawned in the shop, and every evening after business hours Aaron would bring up all bits of jewellery that had been brought in during the day, and his mother would lock them up in a safe that stood in her room close beside her bed. The key of the safe she always carried about with her. For the most part these bits of jewellery consisted of cheap rings and brooches, but now and again some impoverished lady or gentleman would bring more valuable articles along for the purpose of raising a temporary loan upon them, and at the time of the tragedy there were some fine diamond ornaments reposing in the safe in old Mrs. Levison's room.

“Now, young Mrs. Levison had more than once

suggested that she might wear some of this fine jewellery when she went out to balls and parties. She saw no harm in it, and neither for the matter of that did Reuben. Why shouldn't Rebecca wear a few ornaments now and again if she wanted to? They would always be punctually returned, of course, and they could not possibly come to any harm. But the very suggestion of such a thing was anathema to the old lady, and in her flat refusal ever to gratify such a senseless whim she had the whole-hearted support of her eldest son; such a swerving from traditional business integrity was not to be thought of in the Levison household.

"On that memorable Saturday evening young Mrs. Levison was going with her brother-in-law to one of the big charity balls at the Kensington Town Hall, and her great desire was to wear for the occasion a set of diamond stars, which had lately been pledged in the shop, and which were locked up in the old lady's safe. Of course, Mrs. Levison refused, and it seems that the two ladies very nearly came to blows about this, the quarrel being all the more violent as Reuben hotly sided with his sister-in-law against his mother.

"What, then, was the position in the Levison household on the day of the mysterious tragedy?" the Old Man in the Corner went on presently; "an armed truce between the two ladies; the lovely Rebecca sore and defiant, pining to gratify a whim which was being denied her; and old Mrs. Levison more bitter than usual against her, owing to Reuben's partisan-

ship. Egged on by Rebecca, he was furious with his mother, and vowed that he was sick of the family, and meant to leave home in order to be free to lead his own life, and so on. It was all talk-talk, of course, as he was entirely dependent on his mother, but it went to show the ugliness of his temper and the domination which his brother's wife exercised over him. Aaron, on the other hand, took no part in the quarrel, but the servants remarked that he was unwontedly morose all day, and that his wife was very curt and disagreeable with him.

"Nothing, however, of any importance occurred during the day until the hour of dinner, which as usual was served in the parlour at the back of the shop at seven o'clock. It seems that as soon as the family sat down to their meal, there was another violent quarrel on some subject or other between the two ladies, Rebecca being hotly backed up by Reuben, and Aaron taking no part in the discussion; in the midst of the quarrel, and following certain highly offensive words spoken by Reuben, old Mrs. Levison got up abruptly from the table, and went upstairs to her own room, which was immediately overhead, at the back of the house, next to the drawing-room; nor did she come downstairs again that evening.

"At half-past nine the three servants went up to bed according to the rule of the house. Old Mrs. Levison, who was a real autocrat in the management of the household, expected the girls to be down at six every morning, but they were free to go to bed



as soon as their work was done, and half-past nine was their usual time.

"Two of the girls slept at the top of the house, and the housemaid, Ida Griggs by name, who also acted as a sort of maid to old Mrs. Levison, occupied a small slip room on the half-landing immediately above the old lady's bed-room. On the floor above this there was a large bed-room at the back, and a bath-room and dressing-room in front, all occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Aaron, and over that the two maids' room, and one for Mr. Reuben, and a small spare room in which Mr. Aaron would sleep now and again when his wife was likely to be out late and he did not want to get his night's rest broken by her home-coming; or if he himself was going to be late home on a holiday night after one of those country excursions on his bicycle of which he was immensely fond, and in which he indulged himself from time to time.

"On this fateful Saturday evening Aaron was kept late in the shop, but he finally went up to bed soon after ten, after he had seen to all the doors below being bolted and barred, with the exception of the front door which had to be left on the latch, Mrs. Aaron having the latchkey. Thus the house was shut up and everyone in bed by half-past ten.

"In the meanwhile, the lovely Rebecca and Reuben had dressed and gone to the ball.

"The next morning, at a little before six, Ida Griggs, the housemaid, having got up and dressed, prepared to go downstairs; but when she went to open

her bed-room door she found it locked—locked on the outside. At first she thought that the other girls were playing her a silly trick, and presently, hearing the patter of their feet on the stairs, she pounded against the door with her fists. It took the others some time to understand what was amiss, but at last they did try the lock on the outside, and found that the key had been turned and that Ida was indeed locked in.

“They let her out, and for the moment it did not seem to strike any of the girls that this locking of a door from the outside had a sinister significance. Anyway, they all went down into the kitchen, and Ida prepared old Mrs. Levison’s early cup of tea. This she had to take up every morning at half-past six; on this occasion she went up as usual, knocked at her mistress’ door, and waited to be let in, as the old lady always slept behind locked doors. But no sound came from within, though Ida knocked repeatedly, and loudly called her mistress by name.

“Soon she started screaming, and her screams brought the household together; the two girls came up from the kitchen, Mr. Aaron came down from the top floor brandishing a poker, and presently Mrs. Aaron opened her door and came down clad in a filmy and exquisite nightgown, her eyes still heavy with sleep, and her beautiful hair streaming down her back.

“Mr. Aaron, genuinely alarmed, glued his ear to the keyhole, but not a sound could he hear. Behind that locked door absolute silence reigned. Fearing

the worst, he set himself the task of breaking open the door, which after some effort and the use of the poker he succeeded in doing, and here the sight that met his eyes filled his soul with horror, for he saw his mother lying on the floor of her bed-room in a pool of blood.

"Evidently an awful crime had been committed. The unfortunate woman was fully dressed, as she had been on the evening before; the door of the safe was open, with the key still in the lock, but no other piece of furniture appeared to be disturbed; the one window of the room was wide open, and the one door had been locked on the inside; the other door, the one which gave on the front drawing-room, being permanently blocked by a heavy wardrobe; and below the open window the bunch of creepers against the wall was all broken and torn, showing plainly the way that the miscreant had escaped.

"After a few moments of awe-stricken silence Aaron Levison regained control of himself, and at once telephoned, first for the police and then for the doctor, but he would not allow anything in the room to be touched, not even his mother's dead body.

"For this precaution he was highly commended by the police inspector, who presently appeared upon the scene, accompanied by a constable and the divisional surgeon. The latter proceeded to examine the body. He stated that there had been an attempt to strangle the old woman, the marks of fingers being clearly visible round her throat; in her struggle for freedom she must have fallen backwards, and in so



doing struck her head against the corner of the marble washstand, which fractured her skull, causing her death.

“Meanwhile the inspector had been examining the premises; he found that the back door, which gave on the yard and the one that gave on the front area were barred and locked, just as Mr. Aaron had left them before he went up to bed the previous night; on the other hand the front door was still on the latch, young Mrs. Levison having apparently failed to bolt it when she came home from the ball.

“In the backyard the creeper against the wall below the window of Mrs. Levison’s room was certainly torn. The miscreant had undoubtedly made his escape that way—but he could not have got up to the window, save with the aid of a ladder. The creeper was too slender to have supported any man’s weight, and the brick wall of the house offered no kind of foothold, even to a cat. The yard itself was surrounded on every side by the backyards of contiguous houses, and against the dividing walls there were clumps of Virginia creeper and anæmic shrubs such as are usually found in London backyards.

“Now neither on those walls nor on the creepers and shrubs was there the slightest trace of a ladder being dragged across, or even of a man having climbed the walls or slung a rope over; there was not a twig of shrub broken or a leaf of creeper disturbed.

“With regard to the safe, it must either have been open at the time that the murderer attacked Mrs. Levison, or he had found the key and opened the safe

after he had committed that awful crime. Certainly the contents did not appear to have been greatly disturbed; no jewellery or other pledged goods of value were missing. Mr. Aaron could verify this by his books. But whether his mother had any money in the safe he was not in a position to say.

"Whether robbery had been the motive for the crime or its corollary, only subsequent investigation would reveal; for the moment the inspector contented himself with putting a few leading questions to the various members of the household, and subsequently questioning the neighbours. The public, of course, was not to know what the result of these preliminary investigations were, but the midday papers were in a position to assert that no one, with perhaps the exception of Ida Griggs, had seen or heard anything alarming during the night, and that the most minute inquiries in the neighbourhood failed to bring forth the slightest indication of how the murderer effected an entrance into the house.

"The papers were also able to state that young Mrs. Levison returned from the ball in the small hours of the morning, but that Mr. Reuben Levison did not sleep in the house at all that night.

"I should indeed have been bitterly disappointed had circumstances prevented me from attending that particular inquest. From the first, one was conscious of an atmosphere of mystery that hung over the events of that night in the Bishop's Road household; here, indeed, was no ordinary crime; the motive for it was still obscured, and one instinctively felt that some-

where in this vast City of London there lurked a criminal of no mean intelligence who would probably remain unpunished.

“Even the evidence of the police was not as uninteresting as it usually is, because it established beyond a doubt that this was not a case of common burglary and housebreaking. Certainly the open window and the torn creeper suggested that the miscreant had made his escape that way, but how he effected an entrance into Mrs. Levison’s room remained an unsolved riddle. The absence of any trace of a man’s passage on the surrounding walls of the backyard was very mysterious, and it was firmly established that the back door and the area door were secured, barred, and bolted from the inside. A burglar might, of course, have entered the house by the front door, which was on the latch, using a skeleton key, but it still remained inconceivable how he gained access into Mrs. Levison’s room.

“From the first the public had felt that there was a background of domestic drama behind the seemingly purposeless crime, for it did appear purposeless, seeing that so much portable jewellery had been left untouched in the safe. But it was when Ida Griggs, the housemaid, stood up in response to her name being called, that one seemed to see the curtain going up on the first act of a terrible tragedy.

“Griggs was a colourless, youngish woman, with thin, sallow face, round blue eyes, and thin lips, and directly she began to speak one felt that underneath



her placid, old maidish manner there was an under-current of bitter spite, and even of passion. For some reason which probably would come to light later on, she appeared to have conceived a hatred for Mrs. Aaron; on the other hand she had obviously been doggedly attached to her late mistress, and in the evidence she dwelt on the quarrels between the two ladies, especially on the scene of violence that occurred at the dinner-table on Saturday, and which culminated in old Mrs. Levison flouncing out of the room.

"‘Mrs. Levison was that upset,’ the girl went on in answer to a question put to her by the coroner, ‘that I thought she was going to be ill, and she says to me that women like Mrs. Aaron would stick at nothing to get a new gown or a bit of jewellery. She also says to me——’"

"But at this point the coroner checked her flow of eloquence, as of course what the dead woman had said could not be admitted as evidence. But, nevertheless, the impression remained vividly upon the public that there had been a terrible quarrel between those two, and, of course, we all knew that young Mrs. Levison had been seen at the ball, wearing those five diamond stars; we did not need the sworn testimony of several witnesses who were called and interrogated on that point. We knew that Rebecca Levison had worn the diamond stars at the ball, and that Police Inspector Blackshire found them on her dressing-table the morning after the murder.

“Nor did she deny having worn them. At the inquest she renewed the statement which she had already made to the police.

“‘My brother-in-law, Reuben,’ she said, ‘was a great favourite with his mother, and when we were both of us ready dressed he went into Mrs. Levison’s room to say good-night to her. He cajoled her into letting me wear the diamond stars that night. In fact, he always could make her do anything he really wanted, and they parted the best of friends.’

“‘At what time did you go to the ball, Mrs. Levison?’ the coroner asked.

“‘My brother-in-law,’ she replied, ‘went out to call a taxi at half-past nine, and he and I got into it the moment one drew up.’

“‘And Mr. Reuben Levison had been in to say good-night to his mother just before that?’

“‘Yes, about ten minutes before.’

“‘And he brought you the stars then?’ the coroner insisted, ‘and you put them on before he went out to call the taxi?’

“For the fraction of a second Rebecca Levison hesitated, but I do not think that anyone in the audience except myself noted that little fact. Then she said quite firmly:

“‘Yes, Mr. Reuben Levison told me that he had persuaded his mother to let me wear the stars. He handed them to me, and I put them on.’

“‘And that was at half-past nine?’

“Again Rebecca Levison hesitated, this time more markedly; her face was very pale and she passed her

tongue once or twice across her lips before she gave answer.

“‘At about half-past nine,’ she said quite steadily.

“‘And about what time did you come home, Mrs. Levison?’ the coroner asked her blandly.

“‘It must have been close on one o’clock,’ she replied. ‘The dance was a cinderella, but we walked part of the way home.’

“‘What, in the rain?’

“‘It had ceased raining when we came out of the town hall.’

“‘Mr. Reuben Levison did not accompany you all the way?’

“‘He walked with me across the park, then he put me into a taxicab, and I drove home alone. I had my latchkey.’

“‘But you failed to bolt the door after you when you returned. How was that?’

“‘I forgot, I suppose,’ the lovely Rebecca replied with a defiant air. ‘I often forget to bolt the door.’

“‘And did you not see or hear anything strange when you came in?’

“‘I heard nothing. I was rather sleepy and went straight up to my room. I was in bed within ten minutes of coming in.’

“She was speaking quite firmly now, in a clear though rather harsh voice; but that she was nervous, not to say frightened, was very obvious. She had a handkerchief in her hand, with which she fidgeted until it was nothing but a small, wet ball, and she had a habit of standing first on one foot then on the



other, and of shifting the position of her hat. I do not think that there was a single member of the jury who did not think that she was lying, and she knew that they thought so, for now and again her fine dark eyes would scrutinise their faces and dart glances at them either of scorn or of anxiety.

“After a while she appeared very tired, and when pressed by the coroner over some trifling matter, she broke down and began to cry. After which she was allowed to stand down, and Mr. Reuben Levison was called.

“I must say that I took an instinctive dislike to him as he stood before the jury with a jaunty air of complete self-possession. He had a keen yet shifty eye, and sharp features very like a rodent. To me it appeared at once that he was reciting a lesson rather than giving independent evidence. He stated that he had been present at dinner during the quarrel between his mother and sister-in-law, and his mother was certainly very angry at the moment, but later on he went upstairs to bid her good-night. She cried a little, and said some hard things, but in the end she gave way to him as she always did; she opened the safe, got out the diamond stars and gave them to him, making him promise to return them the very first thing in the morning.

“I told her,’ Reuben went on glibly—‘that I would not be home until the Monday morning. I would see Rebecca into a taxi after the ball, but I had the intention of spending a couple of nights and the intervening Sunday with a pal who had a flat at Haver-

stock Hill. I thought then that my mother would lock the stars up again; however, she was always a woman of her word; once she said a thing she would stick to it—and so she gave me the stars, and Mrs. Aaron wore them that night.'

" 'And you handed the stars to Mrs. Aaron at half-past nine?'

"The coroner asked the question with the same earnest emphasis which he had displayed when he put it to young Mrs. Levison. I saw Reuben's shifty eye flash across at her, and I know that she answered that flash with a slight drop of her eyelids. Whereupon he replied as readily as she had done:

" 'Yes, sir. It must have been about half-past nine.'

"And I assure you that every intelligent person in that room must have felt certain that Reuben was lying just as Rebecca had done before him."

The Old Man in the Corner paused in his narrative. He drank half a glass of milk, smacked his lips, and for a few moments appeared intent on examining one of the complicated knots which he had made in his bit of string. Then, after a while, he resumed:

"The one member of the Levison family," he said, "for whom everyone felt sorry was the eldest son Aaron. Like most men of his race, he had been very fond of his mother, not because of any affection she may have shown him, but just because she was his mother. He had worked hard for her all his life, and now through her death he found himself very much left out in the cold. It seems that by her will the old

lady left all her savings, which it seems were considerable, and a certain share in the business, to Reuben; whilst to Aaron she only left the business nominally, with a great many charges on it in the way of pensions and charitable bequests, and whatever was due to Reuben.

“But here I am digressing, as the matter of the will was not touched upon until later on, but there is no doubt that Aaron knew from the first that it would be Reuben who would primarily benefit by their mother’s death. Nevertheless, he did not speak bitterly about his brother, and nothing that he said could be construed into possible suspicion of Reuben. Seeing him there gentle, almost apologetic, trying to explain away everything that might in any way cast a reflection upon his wife’s conduct—one realised easily enough the man’s position in the family—a kind of good-natured beast of burden, who would do all the work and never receive a ‘thank you’ in return.

“He was not able to throw much light on the horrible tragedy. He, too, had been at the dinner-table when the quarrel occurred, but directly after dinner he had been obliged to return to the shop, it being Saturday night and business very brisk. He had only one assistant to help him, who left at nine o’clock, after putting up the shutters; but he himself remained in the shop until ten o’clock to put things away and make up the books. He heard the taxi being called, and his wife and brother going off to the ball; he was



not quite sure as to when that was, but he dared say it was somewhere near half-past nine.

“As nothing of special value had been pledged that day in the course of business he had no occasion to go and speak with his mother before going up to bed, and on the whole he thought that, as she might still be rather sore and irritable, it would be best not to disturb her again. He did just knock at her door and called out ‘Good-night, mother!’ But hearing no reply, he thought she must already have been asleep.

“In answer to the coroner, Aaron Levison further said that he had slept in the spare room at the top of the house for some time, as his wife was often very late coming home, and he did not like to have his night’s rest broken. He had gone up to bed at ten o’clock, and had neither seen nor heard anything in the house until six o’clock in the morning, when the screams of the maid down below had roused him from his sleep and made him jump out of bed in double-quick time.

“Although Aaron’s evidence was more or less of a formal character, and he spoke very quietly without any show either of swagger or of spite, one could not help feeling that the elements of drama and of mystery connected with this remarkable case were rather accentuated than diminished by what he said. Thus one was more or less prepared for those further developments which brought one’s excitement and interest in the case to their highest point.

Recalled, and pressed by the coroner to try and

memorise every event, however trifling, that occurred on that Saturday evening, Ida Griggs, the maid, said that soon after she had dropped to sleep she woke with the feeling that she had heard some kind of noise, but what it was she could not define; it might have been a bang, or a thud, or a scream. At the time she thought nothing of it, whatever it was, because while she lay awake for a few minutes afterwards, the house was absolutely still; but a moment or two later she certainly heard the window of Mrs. Levison's room being thrown open.

“‘There did not seem to you anything strange in that?’ the coroner asked her.

“‘No, sir,’ she replied. ‘There was nothing funny in Mrs. Levison opening her window. I remember that it was raining rather heavily, for I heard the patter against the window-panes, and Mrs. Levison may have wanted to look at the weather. I went to sleep directly after that, and thought no more about it.’

“‘And you did not happen to glance at the clock at the moment?’

“‘No, sir,’ she said, ‘I did not switch on the light.’

“‘But, having disposed of that point, Ida Griggs had yet another to make, and one that proved more dramatic than anything that had gone before.

“‘While I was clearing away the dinner things,’ she said, ‘Mr. Reuben and Mrs. Aaron were sitting talking in the parlour. At half-past eight Mrs. Aaron rang for me to take up her hot water, as she was going to dress. I took up the water for her, and also for Mrs. Levison, as I always did. I was going to help Mrs. Levison to

undress, but she said she was not going to bed yet as she had some accounts to go through. She kept me talking for a bit, then, while I was with her, there was a knock at the door, and I heard Mr. Reuben asking if he might come in and say good-night. Mrs. Levi-son called out, "Good-night, my boy"; but she would not let Mr. Reuben come in, and I heard him go downstairs again.

" 'A quarter of an hour or so afterwards Mrs. Levi-son dismissed me, and I heard her locking her door after me. I went downstairs on my way to the kitchen; Mrs. Aaron was in the parlour then, fully dressed, and with her cloak on; and Mr. Reuben was there, too, talking to her. The door was wide open, and I saw them both, and I heard Mrs. Aaron say quite spiteful like: "So she would not even see you, the old cat! She must have felt bad!" And Mr. Reuben he laughed and said: "Oh, well, she will have to get over it!" Then they saw me, and stopped talking, and soon afterwards Mr. Reuben went out to call a taxi, and we girls went up to bed.'

" 'It is all a wicked lie!' here broke in a loud, high-pitched voice, and Mrs. Aaron, trembling with excitement, jumped to her feet. 'A lie, I say! The woman is spiteful, and wants to ruin me!'

"The coroner vainly demanded silence, and after a while order was restored, and Mrs. Aaron was persuaded to go quietly out of the room.

"But Ida Griggs did not swerve from her statement. She swore most positively to the conversation which she had overheard between Mr. Reuben and Mrs.



Aaron in the parlour. They were both of them dressed for the ball then, but Ida could not swear whether Mrs. Aaron had the diamonds on, because she was wrapped up in her cloak.

“Of course Reuben, when he was recalled, gave an emphatic lie to the girl’s story. It was ludicrous, he said, to suppose, even for a moment, that his mother would ever refuse to see him. He reiterated his previous statement that he had gone to say good-night to his mother and that the old lady had let him have the stars for Rebecca to wear, chiefly because she had never denied him anything he very much wanted for long.

“Soon after that Mrs. Aaron once more sailed into the room, looking the picture of injured innocence. She, too, denied most strenuously the truth of Ida Griggs’ statement. Old Mrs. Levison, she said, had let Reuben have the stars willingly, and she, Rebecca, had never spoken the words which Ida had attributed to her. In fact, she could not understand why the girl should tell such lies about her.

“‘But there,’ she added, with tears in her beautiful dark eyes, ‘the girl always hated me.’

“Yet one more witness was heard that afternoon whose evidence proved of great interest. This was the assistant in the shop—Samuel Kutz. He could not throw much light on the tragedy, because he had not been out of the shop from six o’clock, when he finished his tea, and nine, when he put up the shutters and went away. But he did say that while he was having his tea in the back parlour, old Mrs. Levison was helping

in the front shop, and Mr. Reuben was there, too, doing nothing in particular, as was his custom. When witness went back to the shop Mrs. Levison went through into the back parlour, and, as soon as she had gone, he noticed that she had left her bag on the bureau behind the counter. Mr. Reuben saw it, too; he picked up the bag, and said with a laugh: 'I'd best take it up at once; the old girl don't like leaving this about.' Kutz told him he thought Mrs. Levison was in the back parlour, but Mr. Reuben was sure she had since gone upstairs.

" 'Anyway,' concluded witness, 'he took the bag and went upstairs with it.'

" 'This may have been a valuable piece of evidence or it may not,' the Old Man in the Corner went on with a grin. "In view of the tragedy occurring so much later; it did not appear so at the time. But it brought in an altogether fresh element of conjecture, and while the police asked for an adjournment pending fresh inquiries, the public was left to ponder over the many puzzles and contradictions that the case presented. Whichever line of argument one followed, one quickly came to a dead stop.

" 'There was first of all the question whether Reuben Levison did cajole his mother into giving him the diamond stars, or whether he was peremptorily refused admittance to her room; but this was just a case of hard swearing between one party and the other; and here public opinion was inclined to take Reuben's version of the story. Mrs. Levison's affection for her younger son was known to all her friends, and people

thought that Ida Griggs had lied in order to incriminate Mrs. Aaron.

"But in this she entirely failed, and here was the first dead stop. You will remember that she said that after she left Mrs. Levison she went downstairs and saw Mrs. Aaron and Mr. Reuben fully dressed in the back parlour, and that afterward she heard Mr. Reuben call a taxi; obviously, therefore, Mrs. Aaron had the diamonds in her possession then, since she was wearing them at the ball, and it is not conceivable that either of those two would have gone off in the taxi, leaving the other to force an entrance into Mrs. Levison's room, strangle her, and steal the diamonds. As Mrs. Aaron could not possibly have done all that in her evening-dress, making her way afterwards from a first floor window down into the yard by clinging to a creeper in the pouring rain, the hideous task must have devolved on Reuben, and even the police, wildly in search of a criminal, could not put the theory forward that a man would murder his mother in order that his sister-in-law might wear a few diamond stars at a ball.

"It was, in fact, the motive of the crime that seemed so utterly inadequate, and therefore public argument fell back on the theory that Reuben had stolen the diamond stars just before dinner, after he had found his mother's handbag in the shop, and that the subsequent murder was the result of ordinary burglary, the miscreant having, during the night, entered Mrs. Levison's room by the window while she was asleep. It was suggested that he had found the key of the safe by the bedside, and was in the act of ransacking the



place when Mrs. Levison woke, and the inevitable struggle ensued resulting in the old lady's death. The chief argument, however, against this theory was the fact that the unfortunate woman was still dressed when she was attacked, and no one who knew her for the careful, thrifty woman she was, could conceive that she would go fast asleep leaving the safe door wide open. This, coupled with the fact that not the slightest trace could be found anywhere in the backyard of the house, or the adjoining yards and walls of the passage, of a miscreant armed with a ladder, constituted another dead stop on the road of public conjecture.

"Finally, when at the adjourned inquest Reuben Levison was able to bring forward more than one witness who could swear that he arrived at the ball at the Kensington Town Hall in the company of his sister-in-law somewhere about ten o'clock, and others who spoke to him from time to time during the evening, it seemed clear that he, at any rate, was innocent of the murder. Mr. Aaron had not gone up to bed until ten o'clock, and if Reuben had planned to return and murder his mother, he could only have done so at a later hour, when he was seen by several people at the Kensington Town Hall.

"Subsequently, the jury returned an open verdict, and that abominable crime has remained unpunished until now. Though it appeared so simple and crude at first, it proved a terrible hard nut for the police to crack. We may say that they never did crack it. They are absolutely convinced that Reuben Levison and Mrs. Aaron planned to murder the old lady, but

how they did it, no one has been able to establish. As for proofs of their guilt, there are none, and never will be, for though they are perhaps a pair of rascals, they are not criminals. It is not they who murdered Mrs. Levison."

"You think it was Ida Griggs?" I put in quickly, as the Old Man in the Corner momentarily ceased talking.

"Ah!" he retorted, with his funny, dry cackle. "You favour that theory, do you?"

"No, I do not," I replied. "But I don't see——"

"It is a foolish theory," he went on, "not only because there was absolutely no reason why Ida Griggs should kill her mistress—she did not rob her, nor had she anything to gain by Mrs. Levison's death—but as she was neither a cat, nor a night moth, she could not possibly have ascended from a first floor window to another on the half-landing above, and entered her own room that way, for we must not lose sight of the fact that her bed-room door was the next morning found locked on the outside, and the key left in the lock."

"Then," I argued, "it must have been a case of ordinary burglary."

"That has been proved impossible," he riposted—"proved to the hilt. No man could have climbed up the wall of the house without a ladder, and no man could have brought a ladder into that backyard without leaving some trace of his passage, however slight."

"But some one killed old Mrs. Levison," I went on with some exasperation. "She did not strangle herself with her own fingers."

"No, she did not do that," he admitted, with a dry laugh.

"Well, then?" I retorted.

"Well, then, the murder must have been committed by one of the inmates of the house," he said; and now I knew that I was on the point of hearing the solution of the mystery of the five diamond stars, because his thin, claw-like fingers were working with feverish rapidity upon his beloved bit of string.

"But neither Mrs. Aaron," I argued, "nor Reuben Levison——"

"Neither!" he broke in decisively. "We all know that. Every proof, both of time and circumstance, both of motive and opportunity, was entirely in their favour. No. We must look for a deeper motive for the hideous crime, a stronger determination, and above all a more powerful physique and easier opportunity for carrying the plot through. Personally, I do not believe that there was a plot to murder; on the other hand, I do believe in the man who idolised his young wife, and had witnessed a deadly quarrel between her and his mother, and I do believe in his going presently to the latter in order to try to soothe her anger against the woman he loved."

"You mean," I gasped, incredulous and scornful, "that it was Aaron Levison?"

"Of course I mean that," he replied placidly. "And if you think over all the circumstances of the case, you will readily agree with me. We know that Aaron Levison loved and admired his wife; we know that he was very athletic. Bear these two facts in mind, and let



your thoughts follow the man after the terrible quarrel at the dinner-table.

“For a while he is busy in the shop, probably brooding over his mother’s anger and the unpleasant consequences it might have for the lovely Rebecca. But presently he goes upstairs, determined to speak with his mother, to plead with her. He knows that the interview with his mother will be unpleasant, that hard words will be spoken against Rebecca; and dreading that Ida Griggs, with the habit of her kind, might sneak out of her room and perhaps glue her ear to the key-hole, he turns the key in the lock of the girl’s bedroom door.

“Then he knocks at his mother’s door, and asks admittance on the pretext that he has something of value to remit to her for keeping in her safe. She would have no reason to refuse. He goes in, talks to his mother; she does not mince her words. By now she knows the diamond stars have been extracted from the safe, stolen by her beloved Reuben for the adornment of the hated daughter-in-law.

“Can’t you see those two arguing over the woman whom the man loves, and whom the older woman hates? Can’t you see the later using words which outrage the husband’s pride and rouses his wrath till it gets beyond his control? Can’t you see him in an access of unreasoning passion gripping his mother by the throat, to smother the insults hurled at his wife? And can’t you see the old woman losing her balance, and hitting her head against the corner of the marble wash-

stand, and falling—falling—whilst the son gazes down, frantic and horror-struck at what he has done?

“Then the instinct of self-preservation is roused. Oh, the man was cleverer than he was given credit for! He remembers with satisfaction locking Ida Griggs’ door from the outside; and now to give the horrible accident the appearance of ordinary burglary! He locks his mother’s door on the inside, switches out the light, then throws open the window. For a youngish man, who is active and athletic, the drop from a first floor window, with the aid of a creeper on the wall, presents but little difficulty, and when a man is faced with a deadly peril, minor dangers do not deter him.

“Fortunately, everything has occurred before he has bolted and barred the downstairs door for the night. This, of course, greatly facilitates matters. He lets himself down through the window, jumps down into the yard, lets himself into the house through the back door, then closes up everything, and quietly goes upstairs to bed.

“There has not been much noise, even his mother’s fall was practically soundless and—poor thing!—she had not the time to scream; the only sound was the opening of the window; it certainly would not bring Ida Griggs out of her bed; girls of her class are more likely to smother their heads under their bedclothes if any alarming noise is heard. And so the unfortunate man is able to sneak up to his room unseen and unheard.

“Whoever would dream of casting suspicion on him?



“He was never mixed up in any quarrel with his mother, and he had nothing much to gain by her death. At the inquest every one was sorry for him; but I could not repress a feeling of admiration for the coolness and cleverness with which he obliterated every trace of his crime. I imagine him carefully wiping his boots before he went upstairs, and brushing and folding up his clothes before he went to bed. Cannot you?” the whimsical creature concluded, as he put his piece of string in the pocket of his funny tweed coat.

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